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An Essay
on
The Authority
of
Names.

By L. WADDELL of Virginia.

Read March 18th 1824
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Authority of Names.

If we would find out truth in many instances we must dare to deviate from the long beaten track, and venture to think with a just and unbiased liberty. Watts.

Quamvis enim cedere auctoritati debeam, rectius tamen arbitror, in tanta re, rationa quam auctoritate superari.

Pliny Lib: 1. Ep: 20 –

The object of the following dissertation is to shew the influence of Names, and the consequences necessarily incident, to such mental servitude.

The human mind even active and upon the alert, fixed as on a pivot, is easily turned with every "wind of doctrine", when assailed by the subtle reasoning of some ingenious theorist; and the legitimate ruler of the mental system being dethroned, is kept captive and in chains.

In the infantile state the authority of the fa-

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rent must of necessity have more or less influence on the tender mind, and may perhaps from improper precepts and worse example, carry the little innocent into fatal errors: but when the powers of the mind are completely developed, and reason uncontrolled is permitted to be the governing principle; the mind calling to its aid, its various faculties, examining for itself into the nature, causes and fitness of things, may by this means surmount the prejudices of education, the never failing source of ignorance, and bane to all attainments in useful knowledge.

If all the causes were combined which have in any way contributed to hinder and retard the progress of intellectual improvement (with the single exception, of that of the Authority of Names) I think I should be warranted in averring, that this last has been by far the most deleterious in its effects. I shall now proceed to enumerate some facts that may substantiate the position I have

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We are told of a Florentine philosopher whose prejudices had taken such deep root, that he could never be persuaded to look through one of Galileo's telescopes, lest he should see some thing in the heavens that might disturb his belief in the Aristotellian philosophy.

The immortal Plato was doubtless instrumental in preventing the philosophers of antiquity from making advances in the science of Nature, which have long since been demonstrated to be practicable. He says, should any one, attempt, by curious research to account for the admirable mechanism (alluding to the composition of colour) he will manifest by so doing, how entirely ignorant he is of divine ~~of divine~~ and human power. But it was a task allotted to the fertility of a Newton's genius, to remove the veil which covered the intellectual eyes of the Grecian sage, and to introduce us to a world of beauties, in the curious

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What but the authority of Aristotle could have dragged the Florentine astronomer, before the Inquisition, for having dared to think that the sun was immoveably fixed, in the centre of the Universe, and that the earth turns round in annual and diurnal motions; opinions so false in philosophy, and so contrary to the word of God!

Cicero was well acquainted with the unhappy influences of authority, and complains in his first book de Natura Deorum: of it. In disputes & controversies (says he) it is not so much the author or patrons of an opinion, as the weight and force of argument which should influence the mind. The authority of those who teach is a frequent hinderance to those who learn, because they utterly neglect to exercise their own judgement, taking for granted whatsoever others whom they reverence have judged for them. I can by no means, continues he, approve what we learn from the Py-

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Pythagoreans that if any thing asserted in disputation was questioned, they were wont to answer, Ipse dixit; that is he himself said so, meaning Pythagoras. So far did prejudice prevail that Authority without reason was sufficient to determine disputes and establish truth.

Human authority, says an able writer, tho' ever so ancient, tho' it hath had universal dominion and swayed all the learned and vulgar world for thousands of years, yet has no firm & undoubted claim to truth; nor is it any infringement of courtesy to enter a caveat, with all due decorum against its pretended dominion. Among all the sciences, what is there, that has been longer established, and more universally received, even since the days of Aristotle, and perhaps for ages before he lived, than this, that all heavy bodies whatsoever tend towards the centre of the earth! But Sir Isaac Newton has found that those large and ponderous bodies, the earth &

all the planets, tend towards the centre of the Sun, whereby the authority of near three thousand years or more, is not only called in question; — but actually rejected and renounced.

If we look with a philosophic eye on all, we should have seen, in the various revolutions, which have made ample reason for astonishment, at the absurdities and puerilities which have prevailed among the vulgar men, both in ancient and modern times. It would seem that of the immortals of mankind, not one deserved, from the very, or most immortality, by the great, glorious of philosophic labourers, we mean, all profoundly have made known, yet more particularly in knowledge and the opinions of mankind; have been affected by the natural consciousness in astronomic and physic science by the dependent circumstances, as from a Newton, and a Locke.

Mankind appear in every age of the world to have been in ideas and subjects of some men at least. And see the great line of revolution, if I may be allowed the term, and overshadowed all to mankind, in every study of man varying as the manner connected with its constitution, have been from time to might spring? And what is that of the human mind in opinions himself, the account of heaven and hell in such the opinions of the orthodox of heaven, from the angel fabric? And all this to answer the purposes of an ambitious man in a mind of power and glory.

But let us now our attention to a subject more intimately connected with the design of the present day, I mean to the consequences which have resulted, and may still result, from the influence of names in Medicine.

To some have the important doctrine of the circulation of the blood been communicated, from

a simple view of it, rather he was unable, those who, some condemning it as a mere innovation, others pretending that it was known before. There is no fact which can tend to establish the effects of preexisting opinions, and the enslaving influence of authority, on the human mind, than the circumstance of two centuries having elapsed, before this singular phenomenon in the animal economy came to be generally known and admitted. What a happy discovery! which enables us, rationally to account for the motion of the blood in our systems, and which has borne away in its tide all the vague and ridiculous notions that had previously existed with regard to it.

Trusting to the constant attention and wisdom of nature, the disciples of Stahl, says Cullen, imposed the art of curing diseases by expectation; and by so doing have proposed only inert and frivolous remedies, jealously opposing & proscribing the use of some of the most energetic

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such as opium and Peruvian Bark. The same author remarks, the so much vaunted Hippocratic method of curing, has often had a very pernicious influence in the practice of physic, by leading physicians into, or continuing them in a weak and feeble practice. In opposition to rational medicine, and the use of antimonial preparations, by the Medical Faculty in Paris may be adduced as a striking evidence of error and bigotry, by which the profession prohibited the use of one the most efficacious of our remedial agents.

Amidst the ignorance which prevailed in the early periods of medical science, it is to be wondered at, says Bell, that a thousand childish imaginations existed, nor that the qualities of the mind were deduced from the physical properties of the heart. The vulgar, for example, speak of the <u>bone</u> of the <u>heart</u>. And from whom did this arise? From Aristotle! who explains to us, that there is at the root of the heart, a bone which serves for its basis: and accordingly numerous physicians who

have written upon the heart, since his time, have spoken more or less mysteriously about the bone.

The vulgar talk in plain terms of a little and big heart, as synonymous with a timorous or courageous heart, but this mistake may be traced to high authority. Bartholine was so much convinced that a small heart begot courage, and a large one irresolution and fear, that he is thoroughly surprised when he finds the contrary, scr. tractus illi homo, iamque audax mentit, ut excentricus in capite frequentes et rimae in cranio testabantur. Pliny informs us of a celebrated Mesenian general, Aristomenes, whose greatness never was known till after his death: for the Lacedaemonians having attacked him three times, resolved at last to open his breast: and there as a proof of his most invincible courage and resolution they found his heart covered with hair. Thus did these great name dancing from obscure notions of the organ.

The science of medicine has been considered

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one, in which experience is to be the only directory, and reasoning and theory are to be rejected entirely, in the practice of our profession. And yet the very author, who prescribes these, readeth in every page of his writings, and as Dr. Rush has very justly observed, establishes a very important truth, and that is, that to reason and theorize in medicine, is not only natural, but an involuntary exercise of the faculties of the human mind. What could I say of the experience of the older physicians in their treatment of febrile diseases, guided solely by his touchstone for correct and scientific practice? What more absurd than convincing non-paralytic while in the horoxysm of an intent fever to a room in which no air was allowed to enter, and persuaded initial irrigeratly. We should consider him mad who would attempt to regulate a mass of metal, by keeping it exposed to the influence of a hot furnace.

We find that Sydenham in purely eco-

ancient physicians, prohibited the use of cathartics in regular arthritis, it being the opinion, "in nutria it is in nature, that no matter of the disease should be thrown out in the extremities, emetics and cathartics will have no other effect, than that of bringing back the offending matter to the bowels." Countenanced by this high authority, says Professor Chapman, we have ever since, with some limited exceptions nearly abandoned the use of purgatives, and been content, to let the attack spontaneously exhaust itself, to envelope the joint with flannel, and to urge the patient an endurance of the pain, constitute, proverbially the amount of what is at present done in a paroxysm of gout.

The ancient physicians considered it terribly dangerous to open an artery which was teeming with the spirits of life, so that when arteriotomy in the temple was first performed, they pronounced it murderous and on this reasoning it

was absolutely unbroken for many ages. And did we submit to the authority of Bell and other surgeons of the last century, "a week or fortnight having elapsed all efforts should be considered as useless in reducing a dislocated bone."

The celebrated Vogel tells us that he has learnt from accumulated experience, that a roasted toad is a specific for the gout: and he assures us that a person may secure himself, for a whole year, from angina, by eating a roasted swallow! Happily for mankind these imagined virtues of the croaking frog, and chattering hirundo have descended to the tomb in which are enshrined the charms and amulets, which once held a place among the remedial resources of our art, and more enlightened views are entertained in the management of the maladies incident to our species.—

Shall reason lend her aid in unravelling the hidden mysteries attending the sciences of Law and Theology? and shall not we throw

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open every portal and avenue for her entrance, to enable us to pry into the equally recondite phenomena of animated nature? Shall the philosopher be guided, in his investigations, while scanning the motions of the heavenly bodies, and in ascertaining the laws of these motions, by reason:— and is there not an equal necessity for our submitting to her dictates, when searching for the causes of disease, its treatment, and the effects which result from morbid actions in the system? Shall the voice of reason be heard when the man of God warns us of our immortal concerns and prescribes our spiritual regimen; and shall we who are the medici of the physical part, refuse to listen to this heavenly messenger, and go with unhearing ears, and our eyes shut to the light, which shines on the path that leads to the fountain of truth. And finally, shall reason find admittance at the bar of a judiciary, where the wrongs of injured innocence are pleaded:

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and shall she not find a place at the bar of our consciences, when we deliberate upon the destiny of those committed to our professional care.

A very great error has been made in considering the human fabrick as a mere machine, or automaton; leaving its vitality entirely out of the question. And accordingly we find in the receipes of some of the old authors, medicines, which obtund the sharp angles of irritating particles floating in the blood, or those which concoct the morbific matter which is to be expelled from the body. Making this most delicately contrived system, this "Harp of a Thousand Strings", this animated being a mere retort or crucible in which the chemist "vexes nature to reveal her secrets", forgetting that this being possesses life, and qualities and properties, and is governed by laws totally different from those, which obtain in inanimate matter. We know 'tis true very little in regard to brute matter, and also of the properties and powers of the inanimate

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creation. We have all this impenetrable veil of darkness, between us and the arcana of animated nature: and still more says Heberden, when the unknown peculiarities of life are taken into the account. For to bodies which possess this principle, belong many powers, the operations of which can never be explained by those laws, by which lifeless matter is governed.

May the period soon arrive when the world shall be blessed with some lofty genius who shall be capable of contemplating the animated world with the same sagacious eye, with which the inanimate has been viewed.

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